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GhostNotes: The Everyday Magnificence of the Ordinary

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, April 11th, 2018

The interdisciplinary, multicultural and extratextual nature of 21st Century culture is indisputable, and Los Angeles remains one of the epicenters of this plurality. A potent snapshot of the last generation of underground Los Angeles can be found in Brian “B+” Cross’s recent book *GhostNotes: Music of the Unplayed*. The book is an extended photo essay of 200 plus images that brings together LA Black Arts poetry, underground West Coast hip-hop, Jamaican dub, Brazilian samba, Ethiopian jazz, Cuban timba and Colombian cumbia. The photos themselves are arranged thematically through the book like songs mixed together on a well-made mixtape.



Published by the University of Texas Press, Cross’s documentary style photos connect music, visual art and radical politics and serves as a remarkable lens to highlight the interconnected nature of 21st Century culture. His photos of people like Kendrick Lamar, the Watts Prophets, Lauryn Hill, Brian Wilson, George Clinton, Erykah Badu, J Dilla, David Axelrod, Bill Withers and Biggie Smalls create a web of associations connecting people, cultures and their creations. The book’s photos are explained further by essays written by Jeff Chang, Greg Tate and Dave Tompkins.

Negative Space as Infinity

In a musical context, “ghost notes” are figures with a rhythmic value, but that aren’t part of the pattern. A quote from one of Cross’s favorite West Coast hip hop artists Divine Styler sheds further light: “Mixed experiences of the past that re-emerge and manifest in the now. Ghost notes are the pocket. Negative space that is part of infinity. The time line of life itself via the soul; I see it as micro and macro. You can’t see it, but it’s there and you feel it.” The book is indeed a pocket into itself: a timeline of music and culture that goes back and forth across eras.



Divine Styler’s quote is printed on the Mix CD companion to the book mixed by JRocc, the famed DJ from the Beat Junkies who “used the book as a template to imagine a sonic journey.” I picked up the CD the same night the book premiered in November 2017 at a gallery in Los Angeles’s Chinatown. (The mix itself is a tour de force featuring music from many of the artists in the book and warrants an article of its own. Suffice it to say, it brings even more meaning to this book of incredible images.)

GhostNotes is international, intergenerational, underground and mainstream. The images vacillate from newer titans like Flying Lotus and Kendrick Lamar to historical leviathans like John Lee Hooker, Art Laboe, Lou Rawls and Brian Wilson. Cross's photography and historical projects have also played an instrumental role in reigniting public interest in forgotten but legendary musicians like Eugene McDaniels and David Axelrod. The book also includes shots of other lesser known artists but legendary to those who know like the late New York artist, Rammellzee and vocalist and writer, T-Love.



Originally born in Ireland, Cross came to Los Angeles at the age of 24 in the spring of 1990 to study Photography at CalArts. Since this time, he has photographed more than one hundred album covers and published photos in the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vibe*, *the Fader*, *Wax Poetics* and he was the feature photographer for *Urb Magazine* during the early 1990s including the period of the 1992 Rodney King Uprisings.

Documenting the Los Angeles Underground

Cross began photographing around Los Angeles while a CalArts graduate student. During this time, two professors influenced his work heavily: the photographer, writer, filmmaker, theorist and critic Allan Sekula and famed Southern California historian and author of *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis. Davis recently told me about his brief period instructing at CalArts during the late 1980s and early 1990s teaching in their Photography Program and when he first met Cross.

"Allan Sekula was one of my supporters and he hoped that I would open a few windows on neglected and novel documentary terrains," Davis remembers. "So my classes consisted primarily of field trips to truck stops, bleak desert towns, the still unchanged citrus towns of the Santa Clarita Valley, and the like. But I was flabbergasted at our first meeting to discover that all but one of the students refused to characterize themselves as photographers. They were 'conceptual artists.'"



Brian Cross was the exception and at the time he was the staff photographer for *Urb* magazine, which at the time was an underground magazine that started in the garage of its founder and publisher Raymond Roker. *Urb* was the tabloid diary of LA's emerging hip-hop and electronic music scene. During the same time as Cross was enrolled in Davis's class, he was attending events around South Central Los Angeles like the Good Life Café's weekly open mic where groups like the Freestyle Fellowship, Jurassic 5 and the Pharcyde came to rise. Cross quickly became friends with these emerging stars and Davis encouraged him to take as many photos as he could. Sooner than later Cross's work was not only in magazines like *Urb* and *Rap Pages*, but being used as album covers.

"*Urb* was giving Brian a large format for almost *Life-Magazine*-like black and white photos," Davis states. "His stunning images often recalled the Magnum photographers of the 1940s and 1950s. Although I knew and admired the work of some of the *L.A. Weekly* photographers, Brian was in another category altogether. Not only his technique, but also his urgent belief that we were witnessing an unprecedented creative explosion from below, incubated in the garages and backyards of South Central LA, that would profoundly change popular culture. He was determined

to capture every possible moment of the process.” Greg Tate corroborates with Davis’s appraisal lauding Cross’s ability “to shine light on the parallel universe of narrative, architecture, and masculine intensity boiling over in the gulliest and most visionary margins of the Hollywood dream machine.”

Another documentarian who was there with Cross during this fertile era is the filmmaker Ava Duvernay, the director of *A Wrinkle in Time* and the Academy Award-nominated film *Selma*. Duvernay was originally a hip-hop artist herself with the artist name Eve and she was in a group called Figures of Speech. Duvernay participated in the weekly open mics at the Good Life Café in the early 1990s along with artists like Jurassic 5, the Pharcyde, Medusa, Chillin Villain Empire, Abstract Rude, Pigeon John and so many others.

This weekly event went from 1989 to 1994 and is considered one of the most innovative and important incubators of lyrical talent in West Coast hip hop history. In between Duvernay’s own hip-hop performances, she plotted a documentary about the Good Life, but it would not be until over a decade later that she brought the film to light using many of Cross’s photos. She ended up making her first film, the award-winning documentary *This is The Life* in 2008. Cross was one of the people interviewed in the film. Both Duvernay and Cross were years ahead of the curve.

It’s Not About A Salary

Cross’s photos from the era were not only in magazines like *Urb* but they also ended up in his first book. In 1993, Mike Davis was beginning to commission books for Verso, the leftwing publisher based in London. Davis asked Cross to consolidate his photos from *Urb* and other magazines to create an oral and visual history of Los Angeles Hip-Hop. The book, *It’s Not About A Salary: Rap, Race + Resistance in Los Angeles*, was one of the first hip-hop history books ever written and it remains a classic. Now out of print, a used copy costs a small fortune on eBay. Davis recalls, “As people used to say, Brian was absolutely ‘down’ and thanks to him an extraordinary record exists of the Homeric age of LA hip-hop.”



Author of *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* and noted hip hop historian Jeff Chang wrote the Introduction to *GhostNotes*. Along with breaking down Cross’s biography and how he’s evolved as an artist, Chang describes Cross’s first book: “B+ traced the hidden histories of musical genius, police brutality, racial segregation, political resistance, and gang violence that defined the city. His black-and-white photos tracked the interior and gathering spaces of a vital, self-organized, self-aware avant-garde underground—community freestyle sessions, club performances, DJs’ bedrooms, gang members at rest—at precisely the moment the culture exploded into the mainstream.”



Though Cross does not consider himself a writer, in addition to his words in his first book, he’s written many liner notes and essays over the years like the essay he recently composed for UC Press’s new book, *The Tide Was Always High: The Music of Latin America in Los Angeles*. His essay in this book is about the history of Brazilian music’s influence across L.A.

Cross did write an essay for *GhostNotes* and nestled at the end of the book, it illuminates many of his thoughts on the process of assembling the images. “I have been in the room,” he writes. “I have asked the awkward question, and I have generally tried to push projects further when I’ve had the

chance. But those chances are rare. More often I am just the photographer, happy to be there, usually inspired, often in awe, with an internal voice chattering away, mostly unheard.”

However, you categorize Cross, the man has been a first-rate documentarian for over a generation of hidden histories. This new book continues what he started a generation ago with several other kindred following chapters. In the same closing essay, quoted above, Cross states, “*GhostNotes* is an attempt to quantify this experience, not just using faces, not just using music performed, not simply by eulogizing spaces, but with a broad brush trying to use all of the colors available. History, geography, observation, ethnography, swing, soul, but with keen ears and sharp eyes.”



GhostNotes captures over 25 years of this energy and not only spotlights Los Angeles, but also features international locales like Mexico City, Brazil, Jamaica, Colombia, Cuba, Ethiopia, South Korea as well as Detroit, New Orleans and New York City. Cross, along with his partner Eric Coleman and their production company Mochilla, has made several films over the last 20 years, including *Keepintime*, *David Axelrod Live* and *Brasilintime*, a feature that spotlights what happened when Brazilian percussionists like Wilson Das Neves and Ivan Conti collaborated with contemporary DJ producers like Babu, Cut Chemist, J.Rocc and Madlib. Cross also served as the director of photography in Banksy’s Academy-Award-nominated documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*.

Back in 2001, well before Banksy was internationally known, Cross told me to come see the now legendary street artist’s art show at 33 1/3rd Books in Silverlake in a small space that now serves as a yoga studio. A few years later, Banksy was worldwide and one of the biggest global artists. This is a pattern in Cross’s career. As Chang notes above, the man has always had a knack for being one step ahead of public consciousness when it relates to art and music.

Cross has taken too many iconic photos to even mention but one includes a shot of Notorious BIG sitting on the roof the Peterson Automotive Museum with the city behind him just a few weeks before he was shot and killed at the same location. There’s a shot of pregnant Lauryn Hill in 1997, Art Laboe in a Hollywood sound studio in 2000, Outkast in 1995 just before they reached superstardom and the father of hip hop, Kool Herc digging through records at a New York City record fair in 1997. Another one of his best-known images is the cover of DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing* in a record store with Lyrics Born and Beni B digging through the crates.



The Everyday Magnificence of the Ordinary

Simultaneously, Cross’s work documents what Chang calls, “the everyday magnificence of the ordinary.” Many of his shots are of less glamorous individuals like record vendors, a family in a living room, a kid riding by on a bicycle or a rustic boat on a river in Colombia. As Chang explains: “Some of his most telling photos are the loving portraits of these record sellers, encountered across multiple continents, usually in the less-regarded parts of the city, sometimes

even in small towns high in the mountains.” It is this combination of images that makes Cross’s work so arresting.



One of the most surreal and ethereal photos is from J Dilla’s 2006 funeral at Forest Lawn Cemetery. You can see the somber crowd of people gathered on the sloping grass with the chaparral foothills behind them and the tip of the US Bank Building peering through the LA haze just over the hillside. The heavy emotion of the day hangs like the heart made painted in the sky for Valentine’s Day and the photo’s panoramic perspective captures this perfectly.



David Axelrod had been a significant producer and artist on Capitol Records from the early 1960s through most of the 1970s, but he disappeared for a few decades following a personal tragedy. Axe’s work was rediscovered in the mid-1990s after being sampled by Dr. Dre, DJ Shadow, De La Soul, Diamond D, Lauryn Hill, The Beatnuts and so many others. As Axelrod’s music began making the rounds again, Cross befriended him and even ended up finding a lost record in Axelrod’s North Hollywood home that had never been released.

In 2001, Mo Wax Records released this album as the self-titled, *David Axelrod*. Cross not only shot all the photos for the LP, Axelrod thanked him further by naming a song on it in Cross’s honor: “Big B Plus.” A few years after this, Cross and Eric Coleman helped Axelrod release a DVD of a very rare live performance conducting an orchestra of classically trained musicians at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Most of the songs had never been played live before in front of a large crowd.

This includes Axelrod’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* tracks, most of which were sampled in the Golden Age of Hip-Hop. This became a documentary film that premiered at the Egyptian Theater in Hollywood in 2007 and was released as a DVD. Though Axelrod passed in early 2017, Cross had a 20 plus year friendship with him and played a major role in the legend’s resurrection.



There are other similar stories through Cross’s career of artists his work helped spotlight and bring back into the public eye. Some like Axelrod were from LA, but others were international like Brazilian composer and arranger Arthur Verocai. Greg Tate’s final paragraph in one of the book’s essays puts it all in perspective: “The elemental fundamentals and grandeur of everyday people doing everyday living round the world whilst tunefully organized to defy globalized factory and farm system quotas are made manifest for this observer in the ghostly and well-played notes of B+. In this collection, brotherman has given us a most moving, motion-capturing, and soulful tableaux of can’t-stop-won’t-stop, aural-and-asphalt-induced photographic witnessing.”



Several of the photos featured in *Ghostnotes* will be on display at the ETA cocktail lounge in Highland Park at 5630 Figueroa, L.A., CA, 90042. The opening party is on April 14th at 8pm and the exhibit will continue indefinitely for the following month. Also, see Cross’s latest album cover photography in Kamasi Washington’s forthcoming double album *Heaven and Earth*.

All Photos taken by Brian Cross and used with his permission.

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